

and more conformable to Christ's commands as recorded in the Gospel. He laid great stress on the enormous wealth locked up in the hands of the abbots, useless to the State and to society. Merchants and warriors, he said, sometimes cause great loss to the commonwealth, but they are also a source of great gain, whereas monks are a continual loss.¹

If Henry the Eighth, instead of sedulously raking up dirty stories by royal commissions appointed for the purpose, had based his action solely on the general arguments that Wycliffe had long ago advanced, the dissolution of the monasteries would have stood for all time as a great act of national justice and common sense. If a King intends to disfrock all the monks of his kingdom, he must find reasons that will apply to all. The charge of vice could never, we will be ready to believe for the sake of human nature, be true of all or nearly all. On the other hand, the charges which Wycliffe advanced were universal in their application, for they were objections to the monastic system, as useless in the state of society to which England had attained.

Notwithstanding their isolation, there were several ways in which the monasteries were brought into contact with the outside world. Their endowments were burdened with duties towards the poor, which, in the absence of all contradictory evidence in an age of satire, we may assume to have been performed in accordance with legal and traditional requirements. Charity was then a religious duty, not a social science. This conception of it can still be found surviving in an Elizabethan play, where the heroine appeals to the groundlings with the cheap sentiment: 'It takes away the holy use of charity to examine wants.'² The performance of this well-meaning but harmful injunction of the Catholic Church was specially confided to the monasteries. Those endowments, which maintained labourers in need of old age pensions as bedesmen, were indeed most beneficial to the community. But it can scarcely be doubted that the promiscuous doles, which attracted a daily crowd to the abbey, were the very worst remedy for a society so disorgan-

¹ *De Bias.*, 188-9 ; JPoZ, *Works*, i. 244-7. * Fletcher's *Pilgrim*, act i. scene i.